

## **Executive Summary**

In 1998, Congress passed the Reading Excellence Act (REA) as an amendment to Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The purpose of the new legislation was to improve the reading performance of elementary (K-3) students; its specific goals included:

- Providing children with the readiness skills and support they need in early childhood to learn to read once they enter school
- Teaching every child to read by the end of third grade
- Improving the reading skills of students and the instructional practices of teachers and, appropriate, other instructional staff.
- Expanding the number of high-quality family literacy program
- Providing early literacy intervention to reduce the number of children who are inappropriately referred to special education

The State of Montana's Office of Public Instruction (OPI) received a Reading Excellence Act grant in August 2001 in order to conduct initiatives to support teachers in the use of a balanced approach to the teaching to students in kindergarten through third grade. These initiatives were based on findings of scientifically-based reading research and had the goal of ensuring that all children are able to read independently and well by the end of third grade.

The state conducted sub-grant competition and awarded funding to 30 schools in 24 eligible districts. These grants ran from May 1, 2002 to July 30, 2004 and provided schools with finding between \$150,000 and \$400,000 to support their reading improvement efforts, including teaching and learning of reading in grades K-3, family literacy programs, and tutorial assistance for struggling readers.

To support the REA schools, OPI provided professional development programs and technical assistance to schools to increase their understanding of and competence in using research-based instructional strategies. They also supported and monitored schools in meeting the program requirements, including the adoption of curricular materials that cover the six dimensions of reading, adoption of assessment materials to monitor student progress, and implementing school-level professional development through the reading coach and other sources.

The final evaluation report includes findings from data collected by the statewide evaluators, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL). These data include: Fox in a Box reading assessment results; surveys of all participating teachers and reading couches; in-depth interviews with reading coaches and principals; site visits to 11

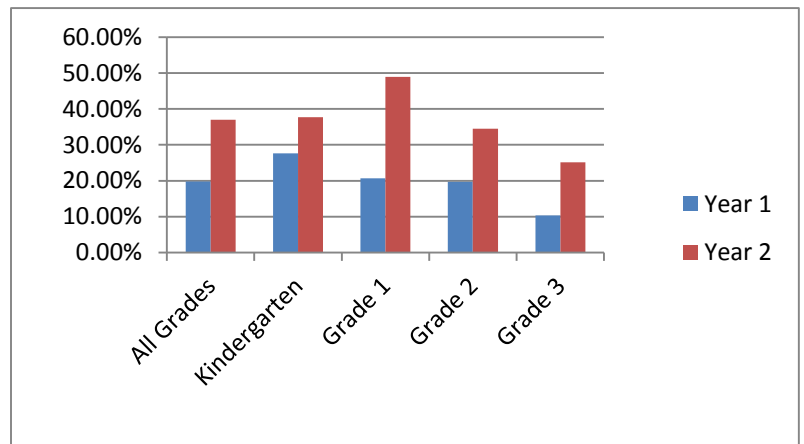
participating schools, including classroom observations; and telephone interviews with reading fellows and state project staff members.

Highlights from the report are described below.

## Achievement

The reading assessment, Fox in a Box (CTB/McGraw-Hill), was selected as the student assessment package from Montana REA schools. Fox in a Box was administered at least twice a year (fall and spring) to all students in grades K-3. The assessment has multiple components within four strands: phonemic awareness, phonics, reading and oral expression, and listening and writing. The following findings should be interpreted with caution due to various limitations of the assessment, which was still in a “pilot” stage at the beginning of the grant. The report contains a full discussion of these limitations.

- The percentage of students reaching mastery level as measured by Fox in a Box increased almost 20 percentage points during the second year of REA; from 19.9 percent in spring of Year 1 to 37.0 percent in spring of Year 2. Many other students demonstrated growth from Year 1 to Year 2, but their increases were not enough to move them to mastery levels.



- In Year 2, first-graders had the highest achievement rates; 48.9 percent met mastery levels. Mastery levels were lowest in third-grade (25.1 percent of students). Thirty-five percent of second graders and 37.7 percent of kindergarten students met mastery levels in Year 2.
- There were differences in achievement among various subgroups: Native American students, students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and male students were less likely than their peers to meet mastery levels.
- There were substantially different passing rates for various components of the assessment (e.g., listening comprehension versus reading rate), suggesting that either students were not as prepared in some areas, that those components were more difficult, or that the assessment did not measure what was taught in the core program.

- Many REA schools received Reading First grants to continue their reading reform efforts. Baseline measures of Reading First schools indicate that students from former REA schools had higher baseline assessment results on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy (DIBELS) in three of four grades, compared to students from Reading First schools that were not part of REA.

### **Professional Development and Technical Assistance to Schools**

OPI provided a variety of professional development and support to schools during the REA grant period, including summer institutes, coach and principal meetings, technical assistance from 17 part-time reading fellows and state program staff, and sharing resources. School-level professional development included training from core and supplementary program publishers, external experts, and the REA coaches. In addition, some teachers attended off-site conferences or pursued graduate coursework with support of the REA grant. Data indicate that:

- The clarity of grant expectations and quality of support improved over the life of the grant. Schools praised the state project staff's responsiveness and willingness to be flexible and learn from each experience.
- Feedback about the summer institutes was very positive. Schools valued the resources from the institutes and the opportunity to spend four days together, away from other responsibilities.
- The majority of coaches felt that the professional development for coaches had been useful, although they requested more training for working with adult learners. Principal feedback about professional development for principals was less positive, although most felt it had improved over the life of the grant.
- At the school-level, study groups and grade-level meetings were frequently cited as the most successful form of professional development because they were ongoing, structured, and focused on instruction, assessment, and achievement. On the other hand, at least three schools reported that their study groups had not been successful.
- For many small, rural schools, travel distances were barriers to accessing professional development opportunities.
- Feedback about reading fellows was varied; some schools viewed their follow as an important source of support and resources while others saw them as unnecessary.

## **School Structures and Supports**

REA required schools to develop structures and systems to increase collaboration among staff, increase the use of assessment data, and implement family literacy activities. Principals, reading coaches, and Reading Leadership Teams were the driving force behind school-level change. Data indicate that:

- During the course of REA, there was a great deal of growth in reading leadership. Some schools had tremendously effective principals who were viewed by staff as visible advocates for reading. Reading coaches worked very hard to fulfill their many responsibilities and most were viewed by staff members as experts and resources in reading. However, the roles of the principal and reading coach as envisioned by the state were not fully realized across all schools.
- By the end of the grant, the strong majority of teachers supported REA. Most also agreed that REA had helped their school develop a more collaborative culture. This support took time to develop in some schools.
- Reading-related meetings, including grade-level and Reading Leadership Team meetings provided an important forum for increasing communication and collaboration.
- Implementation of the family literacy component of REA was a challenge for most schools. Schools implemented a range of family literacy events, but many questioned the impact of their efforts. Family literacy was not a focus of professional development from the state.
- Despite the many challenges of Fox in a Box assessment, enormous progress was made in REA schools regarding assessment administration and use of data, including using data to drive instruction, group students, and target interventions.

## **Curriculum and Instruction**

Schools were required to select core reading programs that were consistent with scientifically based reading research and aligned with Montana Reading Content and Performance Standards. In addition, all schools were required to implement a 90-minute reading block and provide additional interventions for struggling readers. Instruction should have included the five essential components and maximized student engagement. Data indicate that:

- Participating schools established and protected structures to increase the quantity and quality of instruction in K-3 classrooms. All schools implemented at least a 90-minute reading block. Most schools reported a high level of fidelity in

- implementing their core programs by the end of Year 2, and used assessment data to group students by instructional level.
- The grant had an impact on the content of reading instruction and the instructional strategies employed by teachers. The majority of teachers and coaches agreed that reading instruction had improved over the life of the grant and that reading programs included all five of the essential components of reading. Differentiating instruction was a challenge for many teachers.
  - Observations highlighted some strong and explicit instructional practices in many of the five essential components. Many teachers employed multiple strategies to maximize student engagement and had established clear rules and routines so that instructional time and student engagement were not lost to directions and transitions.
  - Observations also highlighted areas for instructional improvement. For example, many lessons only utilized simple, short-answer practice such as using words in sentences or answering recall questions. Some lessons were less engaging, with opportunities for student participation limited to brief responses to teacher questions one student at a time or content that appeared too easy for most students.
  - Schools provided additional instructional supports for many students. Coaches reported that approximately one quarter (26%) of all REA students received interventions outside the 90-minute reading block. The format, intensity, and quality of interventions varied.
  - Many schools that served a high percentage of Native American students spent time supplementing their programs with materials more relevant to Native communities. Some teachers and coaches believed that the grant had not adequately addressed all of the relevant issues for Native American students.

## **Conclusions**

The Montana REA program's accomplishments are many. In terms of the big picture, REA laid a very solid foundation for the grant's successor, Reading First. Not only did lessons learned from REA help inform Montana's Reading First federal grant application, but allowed the state to start the new grant with explicit expectations, solid support structures, and deepened expertise in reading.

Within participating schools, there were many successes as well. Although not all schools demonstrated the same levels of success with REA, all schools increased the amount of time and resources committed to reading and many schools found themselves "on the same page" in terms of reading instruction. By the end of the grant, all schools analyzed and used student data more regularly and had increased staff communication and collaboration about reading through grade-level meetings, study groups, and Reading

Leadership Teams. Intensive REA professional development and the adoption of core reading programs also had an impact on reading instruction.

Data from Fox in a Box assessments showed a substantial increase in the percentage of students reading at grade level from spring of Year 1 to spring of Year 2. Baseline scores for Reading First were also higher in REA schools than non-REA schools. However, over only two years, REA's goal of having all students read at grade-level by the end of the third grade was not realized. With continued implementation of REA structures and strategies, more students may meet grad-level benchmarks over time.